



GENDER, PEACE & SECURITY IN BRIEF #5

How do Yemeni women use art as a tool for peacebuilding in times of war?

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INTRODUCTION

Yemen is experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.¹ By 2020, it is estimated that 233,000 people will have been killed mainly because of a lack of hospitals, medicine and food.² The war has had a devastating impact on all citizens, but the effect of the conflict impacts different segments of society in various ways. For example, lack of access to medical care inflicts a severe impact on women, especially during pregnancy and childbirth, as it puts them at greater risk of pregnancy related complications, death and disability.³ But women are not passive spectators of the conflict. They are actively involved, “from contributing to the war effort and combat, to protecting their families, to leading humanitarian relief efforts, or reducing tensions and promoting cohesion within their communities.”⁴ Researchers have documented the role of women in peacebuilding⁵

1 “Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in the world, warns UN,” UN News, 14 February 2019. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811>.

2 Bel Trew, “Yemen war dead could hit 233,000 by 2020 in what UN calls ‘humanity’s greatest preventable disaster,’” 30 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-war-death-toll-un-houthi-gulf-saudi-arabia-arms-a8892926.html>.

3 Seema Jalaan, “Facing Famine, Girls and Women Bear the Heaviest Burden,” 7 August 2017. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facing-famine-girls-and-women-bear-the-heaviest-burden_b_59838dc1e4b00833d1de26af.

4 Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabad. “Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen,” (SaferWorld, 17 June 2017). Available at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anythin-ga-womenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen>.

5 See for example: Wameedh Shakir, “Women and Peacemaking in Yemen. Mapping the Realities,” (Crisis Management Initiative, 2015). Available at: http://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Women_and_Peacemaking_in_Yemen_EN.pdf.

in detail, including the ways they mitigate the impact of the conflict by engaging in humanitarian relief and providing social and psychological support for people who have been traumatized by the war⁶, as well as their community level functions as tribal mediators⁷, and their involvement in international advocacy.

Peacebuilding, however, continues to be narrowly defined and understood. **Considering that art is about the freedom to express and to engage with an audience, it is inherently political.** Yet, despite the political implications of art as propaganda or as a peacebuilding tool, conventional frameworks for understanding the Yemeni war that began in 2015 often fail to incorporate the role of cultural and artistic expressions as forms of contestations and platforms for critical examination of society. None of the artistic projects that promote peace, for example, have been documented in researcher’s reports on women’s roles and contributions to peacebuilding.

Art is essentially about storytelling. Stories and their impact on our emotions can be found at the center of public policy, considering that political communication is to “a large extent about stories, words, symbols

6 Connie Christiansen, “How Yemeni Women are Fighting the War,” The Conversation. 2 February 2018. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/how-yemeni-women-are-fighting-the-war-89951>.

7 Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabad, “Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen,” (SaferWorld, 17 June 2017). Available at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anythin-ga-womenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen>.

and how they move us.”⁸ It is therefore very important to study art through the exploration of rhetoric, particularly the rhetoric of political power. The increase in artistic expression in Yemen, especially by female artists, is also a phenomenon that cannot be avoided. Female artists, whether in film, visual art or literature, are expressing themselves through these mediums in increasing numbers, yet their work, as that of their male colleagues, has been significantly marginalized in the academic and humanitarian sectors. Whether it is war propaganda or art promoting peace, Yemeni female artists are exploring issues of war, trauma, and collective memory. When these artistic mediums reach the public, they often trigger public discussions and peacebuilding efforts in two main ways: self-expression as therapy and the reconstruction of narratives.

STATE OF THE ART

Self-expression as therapy:

One may argue that it is not the right time to talk about art and female artists while Yemen is going through this devastating conflict. Yet, many artists believe that prioritizing art as a form of self-expression amidst conflict is necessary for the survival of society. Art can help people make sense of the world. Artists have a license in a way

⁸ Jules Evans, “How Arts and Humanities Can Influence Public Policy,” Huffington Post, 19 February 2013. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jules-evans/arts-humanities-influence-public-policy_b_2709614.html.

to explore and ask questions people don’t normally ask. In 2017, the Sana’a based art collective #SupportYemen began a project with the ‘women’s creative writers’ called Magnet with the aim of providing a safe space for women to share their stories through self-expression. The goal of the project is to “build trust and establish a safe space for opening up and expressing feelings and thoughts through mediums of speaking, writing and drawing.” In so doing, they hope to “establish a habit of self expression to tackle trauma, gain focus and ability to overcome daily personal and displacement related distress through the art of fiction and non-fiction writing”. One of the main results has been the first Arabic comic in Yemen written and drawn exclusively by women, which discusses gender-based violence in ways that are both daring and deeply personal.

The stories, whether imagined or written as memoirs, are manifestations of unconscious feelings. **Art allows people to tap into their unconscious in ways that are important for healing and eventually reconstructing narrative.** Given that the war has negatively affected women’s mental health,⁹ art can be used as a form of healing that is more affordable and easier to access than psychotherapy. In fact, art helps people process trauma at their own pace, in controlled dosages. Through art, artists externalize the violence

⁹ Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabad. “Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen,” (SaferWorld, 17 June 2017). Available at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anythin-ga-womenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen>.

they have witnessed and begin to understand and reconstruct what has happened.

In her TEDx Sana'a talk, painter Haya Al Hammoumi discussed her journey towards healing through her painting. "The Victims" and "Cry of Anger" were painted in times when she wanted to depict the state of society as a victim of a raging war. Her painting on verbal violence against women, as part of the project of the Institute for the Development of Young Cadres in Yemen, sums up the suffering of women in Yemen. Healing has to start with the individual, but by opening the conversation, making it public and engaging, then repeating it several times, society can slowly engage in a process of collective healing. There is a direct line between inner peace, peace in the family, in the community and then in the nation. But healing begins with the individual.

Reconstruction of narratives:

Artists can play an important role in building more tolerant and pluralistic societies. Cognitive science tells us that our brains rely on subconscious frames including placing people in categories and relying on stereotypes. Only through connecting with the unconscious can we start to deconstruct these stereotypes. In a conflict environment where political polarization and identity politics take a center stage, only art can tap into that unconscious and transcend such binaries. Art appreciates the complexities of human nature. In this way, art helps people reflect. Art spaces such as The Basement Cultural Foundation

run by Ms. Shaima Jobran, provide a judgement free space for unfiltered and uncensored discussions, art exhibits, book readings, films etc., which allows for ideas to resonate in the mind. Every time the audience reads what a writer has written or looks at a painting, they are reflecting on it. The making of meaning happens not necessarily in the message itself, but in the mind of the receiver.

Bringing people of diverse opinions together and opening up the space to allow people to speak to one another builds greater empathy and understanding. At a moment when Yemen and the world seem more divided than ever, this is vital for peace.

Perceptions of reality are reinforced by stories we tell, which is why it is important to break away from the single story on Yemen. Artists not only provide a way to broaden the mind, but also provide a way to imagine an alternative reality. In a way, art that has nothing to do with the war is also all about the war, in that it demonstrates that there is another way of living. It offers people a chance to "transcend the here and now."¹⁰ Many artists state that in the hours they work, they live outside the space of war, and then they give that gift to those who engage with their work. Artist Saba Jallas prints photographs of explosions, and then sketches over the smoke to create alternative images of smiling children, women, flowers etc. In so doing, she takes people away from that moment of horror that they experienced, and continue

¹⁰ Howard Zinn, "Artists in Times of War," CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 9.1 (2007). Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=clcweb>.

to experience daily, and shows them another world that is possible. Her aim is to instill hope, resilience and inspiration.

It is not about being naively hopeful; it is about taking control of the uncontrollable chaos in their lives. It is about reclaiming agency. **While it is important to document violations of the war, positive public art can help construct a new shared narrative that tells people that peace is possible and that individuals can play a part in achieving and sustaining peace despite the bleakness of the currently reality.** By elevating the new narratives and repeating them from multiple places, the narrative of peace can gradually become a part of the consciousness of the society.

CONCLUSIONS

While the artistic productions mentioned here do not have the ability to directly influence peacebuilding through political negotiations, their gradual impact on the long-term political, social and cultural environment is significant. The artists in Yemen have proven that a small group can have a transformative impact, because their single episodes of collective action are perceived as components of a larger struggle. Keeping that in mind, possibilities for supporting women's peacebuilding through the arts is just one strategy of many that should be built on and strengthened, while simultaneously

emphasizing that it has its limitations. To be effective, artistic campaigns have to be participatory and in sync with the dynamics of the local community. Humanitarians and policy makers should learn from artists and not shy away from narrative complexity but should rather embrace it. In fact, they must understand that sometimes bite-sized recommendations are not really possible. In that sense, it is necessary to redefine peacebuilding in order to strengthen organic efforts that include "everyday contributions of women to their families and communities, which may seem ordinary but are in fact vital for social cohesion."¹¹ We need a holistic understanding of what constitutes peace – it's not only about ending the war, but looking further to ensuring access to basic services. If we use this definition then it becomes necessary to support Yemeni artists via trainings in art management and provide capacity-building through greater cultural exchange programs.

¹¹ Marie-Christine Heinze and Marwa Baabad. "Women's role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen," (SaferWorld, 17 June 2017). Available at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anythin-ga-womenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen>.

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